Paul Ewell: This is Paul Ewell interviewing Mr. Victor Pruitt. Is that correct?

Victor Pruitt: Yes.

PE: On June the 15th, 2013, at Cape Charles, Virginia. Would you please state your full name?

VP: Victor Ray Pruitt.

PE: How do you spell your first name?

VP: V-I-C-T-O-R.

PE: And your middle name?

VP: R-A-Y.

PE: Last name?

VP: P-R-U-I-T-T.

PE: You don't have to give me your exact address, but about where do you live?

VP: Onancock, Virginia.

PE: And so is it true that you have experienced working on the water, around the water in the seafood business?

VP: Been in the seafood business all my life.

PE: Well, how'd you start? Tell me about it.

VP: Well, when I was, I think, twelve years old, I went over to Tangier and stayed with my uncle, Sherman Pruitt, which was my daddy's brother. He was a crab potter, and I stayed over there for three or four weeks, got up early in the morning, three o'clock in the morning there, and we went out to fish pots in that Tangier area. Then he went to Crisfield to sell his crabs every day. I do remember one thing when he was catching; he was catching a lot of [inaudible] at the time, pregnant females. He went into one place in Crisfield, and he wasn't getting the price he thought he should be getting for them. Hee got mad over that and said, "I ain't coming back here no more. I'm going to go over across the creek here and sell them over there." Anyway, that was part of everyday living as a crab potter then. This was back in 1962, '63, somewhere along in that.

PE: So, were you born in Tangier?

VP: No, I was born in Harborton, Virginia.

PE: Was your family originally from Tangier?

VP: Yeah. My father was originally from Tangier. He moved off the island when he was ten or twelve years old. His dad was (Alash?) Pruitt. At the time, my grandfather was going back and forth up to Washington, DC, to the fish wharf in Washington. They would go up there, and they would live in these old by-boats, these old rotten by-boats, these chunk canoes. They would stay up there ten to twelve weeks at a time selling seafood. They would go up and down the Potomac River and reload and go back. They would race up and down the Potomac River to get a good dock space, a head dock space when they got to Washington. Whoever got the head dock was the best-selling spot. That's why my grandfather got started in that. That's how my father got started in that too.

PE: But now, where did he get that? Did he buy the seafood?

VP: Yeah, he bought it off crabbers and stuff that worked in Potomac River, and fish and stuff, and seafood dealers up and down the Potomac River. There was a dealer down in Potomac back there called CW O'Bier – was a big seafood dealer, and a lot of guys and people that sold seafood in Washington dealt with this dealer and other dealers in that area. Of course, seafood and crabs and stuff was cheap then. They weren't but two or three dollars a bushel, but you could carry them up to Washington. I don't know. I don't remember exactly what we were getting for them, probably eight to ten dollars a bushel, which was a good profit back when my father was doing it. That was back in the '40s. They made a good living doing that, but they were away from home a lot, twelve, thirteen weeks at a time. Then, they would come home and stay two days, and go back and do the same thing over and over again. Then when the seasons changed, when crabbing was over, then they did the same thing with oysters. But I started going to Washington with my father when I was thirteen years old – I think I was. That was in 1963. At the time, trucking had taken over the seafood business. Going back and forth up and down the river in these old by-boats was pretty well over. The trucks had taken over because it was quicker.

PE: But your dad had a by-boat?

VP: Yeah. That's what we sold off of in Washington, these old by-boats.

PE: Do you remember the name of her?

VP: His first boat was the (Leicester?) and his second boat was named the (Thelma Earl?). What they did, they would put on a Monday or Tuesday – a truck from uptown would come with ice. They had a deck plate in the middle of the boat. They would take off there. They had a haul down in the middle of the boat there like a bin. They would dump maybe fifty or sixty bags of ice. They had a chute that went down in this hole. They would put about fifty or sixty bags of ice down in the bottom of the hole there. Then they would take block ice, which was chopped up in small chunks, oh, maybe twelve inches square. Then they would slide that down the chute, which would hold up together a whole lot longer. They would take three hours to load a boat with ice. Of course, they had two hatches, a forward hatchet and an after hatch. That's how they kept everything cold. Of course, that's what rotted his old boats out, too, keeping everything

damp and wet down there all the time. But anyway, that was part of the business at the time. But I remember doing that when I was twelve, thirteen, fourteen years old, every Monday morning. I used to dread that. It was hard work, but we had to be down, and you have to shovel the ice back up in the corners and stuff because –

PE: Now, where were you getting the ice?

VP: It was a special man that would come down there and sell ice to all the guys at the boats.

PE: Is this on the Potomac River?

VP: Yeah. Right in Washington. Right in Washington to the fish wharf. So this guy had a whole open bed truck. He had a big piece of canvas he'd cut. He would go uptown to the ice plant and load a truck full of ice. Then he would come back down there and back the truck up to the edge of the wharf. He would pull a chute out that would be on the tailgate of the truck. That would go down to the hole in the boat. That's how everything was slid down. But then you had to have a man down in each hole to shovel all the ice up in the corners and stuff because once it started filling up, you had to fill it all inside there, and you had to fill it up clean to the top. That ice will last about a week. You had to do that once a week.

PE: So then you would go from there out to buy?

VP: Well, at the time, we had stopped that. Everything was trucks; trucks were bringing in all the seafood. Back in the days when my grandfather was doing it, they would load the boats full of ice before they would leave the dock. Then they would go down the river and buy stuff off the boats and put the stuff down in the hole, and then they would come back up. Most of the time, they could make one trip per week to go down there and get back up here to the dock. Then sometimes, it would take them three or four days to sell a boatload of whatever they bought. But they made a good living doing that at the time because dollars were hard to come by in them days. I know my grandfather had done very well because I used to hear that my grandfather would come home and my Grandmother Pruitt would like to go out and do a lot of shopping. He'd have to go out. He would have to come home and go pay all her bills. [laughter] Anyway, I guess a lot of people had those problems too, whatever. He'd say, "Yeah, I got to go see what Mrs. Amanda's charged on our account."

PE: Now, where'd she go shopping?

VP: [inaudible] Onancock.

PE: Onancock?

VP: (Foster Chandler?) at the furniture store there used to talk about her. I think she would get somebody to carry her out there in a car. They had an old four-door Plymouth, I remember. They had suicide doors on them. The back door would open up the other way. I think that's what my mother learned to drive on.

PE: Really?

VP: Yeah. We used to put in a lot of hours on that seafood wharf. We would most mornings start at 7:00 in the morning, and it'd be ten, eleven at night before we'd get done. They were fourteen, fifteen-hour days. In my first summer I worked up there, I made three dollars a day, fifteen dollars a week. But that was a lot of money to me at the time. I made enough money to buy me a brand-new bicycle the first summer I worked up there.

Deborah Pruitt: [inaudible]

VP: That's what it turned into.

PE: And this is in?

VP: This is in the '80s.

PE: And that's in Washington?

DP: [inaudible] right next to [inaudible] seafood.

VP: Yeah.

PE: So back in the day, that was –?

VP: This was a by-boat.

PE: That was a boat.

VP: That was a by-boat. Once a year, they would take them to the railway and haul them out and paint their bottom and cut the rotten wood out of them and everything. Then the last go of a lot of them – when he'd take them to the railway – just stayed there. One of my father's partners, Melvin Evans from Crisfield, had a boat named the *Ruth and Annie*. She was a sixty-five-foot by-boat. One of the biggest up there. Anyway, he wanted to retire anyway, so I bought the boat and his half of the business out.

PE: When was this about?

VP: About '76, '77 –

DP: '76 [inaudible]

VP: – somewhere along in that. That was just before we were getting to the point that all the boats and businesses down there were doing more business than what we could handle at the time. We were timed to start making a change. So what we wound up doing was building square barges, doing away with the by-boat, and putting ice machines on them and coolers and stuff.

PE: Now, what did you do with the by-boats you bought?

VP: Oh, well, we sold off of them for years. For ten years, I guess, after that. I remember the day the boat was getting in a little rough shape, hadn't [inaudible] the railway in a while. I had her advertised in *Boats & Harbors*. My father said, "You better sell her and get rid of her because if she sinks to the dock, it's going to cost a lot of money to get her up." So I advertised her in *Boats & Harbors*, and some guy from Florida came up and looked at her, and he came actually to the dock, says, "I understand you got a by-boat here for sale." I was, "Yeah, I got one. Come on back here." I showed it to him. He was over there. I got her started up, and she was running and everything. He was all down in the hull, looking her over and everything. He looked at her for about two hours. I said, "He's going to buy her." I said, "I'm not going to turn down no offers." So he looked, came back over finally, and he said, "Well, you're asking ten thousand dollars, but I can't see that much money in her." He said, "I'll give you six-thousand dollars for it." He handed me these stacks of $100 bills. I looked at him, and I said, "Yeah, give me that." I snatched the six-thousand dollars right out of his hand. I didn't give him a chance to even think about it because I wanted to get away from her. He said he wanted to haul fuel oil off for [inaudible] in her, but I knew what he was going to do with her. He was going to carry down there and run dope over somewhere. She weren't in good enough shape to run fuel all in. Just what I figured he was wanting to use her for anyway. Well, about three years later, some guy from Florida called me that owned a marina down in Florida. He said, "Do you own a boat named the *Ruth and Annie*? I said, "I used to." He said, "Well, you still do." I said, "What do you mean I still do?" He said, "She's in your name." I said, "Oh, I sold her three years ago to a guy. I gave him the boat papers and everything." He said, "Yeah, but she's still in your name." He said, "He owes me a lot of wharfage, and I ain't seen him in I don't know how long. You want her back?" I said, "No, I don't want her back." He said, "Well, if I mail you these papers, will you sign them and send them back?" I said, "Send them on. Send them on." I haven't heard anything from him since. I don't know what happened to the boat.

PE: Do you have any, or do you know anybody who has any photos of her?

DP: We've got [inaudible] –

VP: I got some photos of some by-boats and stuff. I got a model made of her too.

DP: Of her and *The Wanda*.

VP: Another by-boat my father had was called *The Wanda*. Anyway, she was a sixty-foot by-boat. I got a model made of that too.

PE: Who made the models?

DP: A man from Newport News [inaudible].

VP: I don't remember the guy.

DP: They used to go to craft shows.

VP: I don't think he's living anymore.

PE: Just out of curiosity, the *Ruth and Annie*, what kind of engine did she have in her?

VP: She had a 6-71 diesel in her.

PE: Detroit?

VP: Detroit. Yeah.

PE: Now, did you have any boats after her?

VP: No, never did. That was the end of my boat career.

PE: Yeah.

VP: Now my father, he took *The Wanda*, and he hung on to her for a while even after we had the barges up there. He took real good care of her. He finally sold it to a guy in Annapolis. We'd been trying to locate that boat, and we never could. I don't know what happened to her.

PE: And her name was?

VP: *The Wanda*.

PE: How do you spell that?

VP: Just like her name.

PE: Oh, Wanda.

VP: Wanda.

PE: How big was she?

VP: She was sixty-foot.

PE: She was sixty-foot.

VP: Yeah.

PE: Interesting.

VP: Yeah, I spent thirty-one or thirty-two years on that seafood wharf. A lot of good times. A lot of bad times too. [laughter]

PE: I can imagine.

VP: But it was fun in a way.

PE: But you're saying around, I guess, mid-'70s is when trucking started to really take the business away.

VP: Yeah. Yeah. That's when they –

DP: But still, they didn't use the by-boats. Maybe early '70s or late '60s [inaudible].

VP: The by-boats were the tractor trailers of trucking for years until they got good roads and bridges and stuff. The trucks and everything took over it; then they could do it so much faster and stuff.

PE: That's when they started using them a lot down here for crab dredging and stuff, right?

VP: Yeah. Right. They used them here for crab dredging. They had years and years of crab dredging. They were big – just right for that. They put a dredge on each side, and I think they had seven or eight-foot dredges on them. It's a shame they cut that out. I could see them cutting back on it, but now they cut it out altogether. I don't know. These rules and regulations is –

PE: Do you think they'll ever lift the moratorium on crab dredging? Or is that that something here to stay?

VP: This past winter there, they let some people do it, and they put cameras on their dredges. They want to see what damage they were doing to the bottom and the crabs and whatever. I don't know what that's going to bring. But anytime you get the government in something, they're going to ruin it. They're going to ruin it. Anytime they stop something, they don't ever bring it back. It's just like the EPA [Environmental Protection Agency]. They ought to hang everybody in the EPA. Well, it's just how I feel about it. I don't care.

PE: Yeah. You're not the only one that feels that way. Let me ask you this; I'm just curious. We've talked to a lot of folks, especially on the Eastern Shore, who are big into and think the future is aquaculture. Certainly, there's a benefit to oyster and clam, all that jazz. But do you see a time in the near future when there will be no watermen oystering, dredging, tonging, not connected to aquaculture?

VP: Yeah, I think so. I think the regulations is going to wind up putting – the ones that's hanging on, I've seen a documentary there, right up there, up in Maine and everything – the regulations they were putting on the fishermen up there that they said [would] be the last straw that they weren't going to be able to survive. They keep doing that to other people that's in the seafood business and everything. It's going to put the rest of them out of business. Regulations is fine to a certain extent, but you can overdo it, too.

PE: So let me ask you this. If you had to say regulation or overharvesting, which one is the biggest detriment to the industry?

VP: Well, it's definitely – we have overharvested on things, and I got a book on the town of Crisfield. I've been reading [about] there a lot, and in the year 1900, the town of Crisfield was shipping out sixty-thousand gallons of oysters a day. So that is a little over-harvesting. I think you could find a happy medium somewhere or another. I don't know if that's possible or not.

PE: Do you have an opinion one way or the other about the Chesapeake Bay Foundation?

VP: Yeah, I got some opinions on it. I know we've got to clean this bay up the best we can, but it's doing some bad things to some other things, too, like farming. Of course, farming is the runoff. It's a lot of stuff running off these, off the land, and the pesticides they're putting on that's killing stuff in the bay.

PE: So why not regulate farming more?

VP: Well, I think they are because all these tomato farmers here on the Eastern Shore have been here – a guy told me not long ago that they were regulating what they could put on these tomato crops because of the runoff. They were a little easier on the seaside farmers than they were on the bay side. This guy was right in the tomato industry that told me that. A lot of them is going out of business. Of course, I don't know if that's part of the reason. It's probably part of the reason they're going out and part of the reason probably because they tried to get too big. Because one of these companies that's going up for auction, there's signs everywhere on this one company, and I think they were thirty million dollars in debt. How big do you want to get? Bigger ain't always better. I don't know.

PE: So let me ask you this. If you were thirteen years old again, would you do it the same way?

VP: Probably would. Probably would. Yeah. I would change some things on the way. Of course, everybody, I think, would probably do that, change some things and take better advantage of some things that I should have took advantage of.

DP: And now that you're twenty-five years sober, I'd let you [inaudible] any way you want.

VP: Me and my father one time, when we first got married, we got married in 1975, and we bought a piece of oyster ground in Nandua Creek. It was like a hundred and fifty acres, and it only had oysters on about twenty acres of it. And we paid eight hundred dollars apiece for it. We worked that oyster ground for about fifteen years, and we probably got two hundred thousand dollars out of that off that oyster ground.

PE: How many years?

VP: About fifteen years.

PE: About fifteen years.

VP: Yeah. We'd go out and catch us – we dredged it because it was on private ground. We'd go out and catch us sixty, seventy bushels a week. Then carry it back up to Washington and got retail price for them. They would shuck out twelve, thirteen [inaudible] to a bushel because they were rounded up bushels too, and they were good and fat. I wish those days were back because you can make a nice, decent day's work out of that. If that was ever to come back like that. But maybe this farming, I don't know. Maybe this farming and agriculture will lead back to that. I don't know.

PE: Well, certainly getting the bay clean and the water clean.

VP: Yeah. That needs to happen. That needs to happen. I don't think you're going to find the perfect balance on anything, really. But you think about when you're putting crabbers out of business, potters out of business with limits, that works in cycles. A man sitting behind a desk ain't got the right to tell a crabber what limit he can catch because the crabber will know that there's cycles that work the crab. Some years are off, and some years are bountiful and plentiful. Those people sitting behind a desk don't know that.

PE: So are you saying that this crab, oysters, whatever – or not oysters so much – is cyclical, and no matter what watermen do, it's going to be cyclical?

VP: Yeah, sure. You take the ban on rockfish. They needed a ban on rockfish when they put it on there, but they never take it off. Then, when the crab gets scarce, it's been proven they would catch big rockfish, cut their stomachs open, and they're ram full of little, teeny baby crabs. They were eating up all the little crab because there was an overabundance of rockfish. So they don't put that in their calculator and calculate that. Watermen know that, but a man behind a desk don't know nothing.

PE: So, from your perception, scientists and watermen don't work well together?

VP: No. They need to work together.

PE: Why don't they work well together?

VP: Because of the government. They think the government knows everything, and the guys out there working on the water don't know nothing. It should be the other way around. It should be the watermen be in charge of the guys behind the desk. That's what I think. The watermen should be on the boards and the directors and everything, setting down all the regulations and everything. That way, they'd have a say in everything that's going on.

PE: Let me ask you this. We know that the farm lobby is strong. Farmers lobby well. Why do watermen not lobby well? Why are they not on these boards and involved?

VP: Some of them are probably afraid they're going to miss a day's work and not going to these meetings or something. I don't really know that; that's just my guess. But I have heard that

some of them going to these meetings, and these people behind the desk [are] saying, “It don't make no difference what you say; we're going to do it anyway.” That gets them out of heart.

PE: So they don't see the point –

VP: In going, because they know it's a lost cause. That's because there's too much power in the government causing that. That's why they do that, so they won't come and have their opinion.

PE: Makes sense. Interesting. Well, is there anything else you'd like to add? I don't want to take all your afternoon.

VP: No, I’m fine. I enjoy talking. It's been fun.

PE: Well, thank you very much. We'll go ahead and wrap it up. This is Paul Ewell, concluding an interview with Mr. Victor Pruitt on June 15th, 2013. I thank you again.

VP: Thank you.

----------END OF INTERVIEW----------

Reviewed by Molly Graham 7/12/2022